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ABSTRACT

Surveying the current scene in the teaching of composition at the elementary level, this leaflet examines the results of recent research, the materials produced by four curriculum centers, and the opinions of respected authorities in English. It then describes some of the newer teaching practices stimulated by the recent emphasis on the individual and each person's unique cognitive development and acquisition of language arts skills. A summary derived from reflection upon recent research specifies fifteen new directions in writing and composition education. A brief bibliography concludes the leaflet. (JM)

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What's New in Language Arts: Composition

Eldonna L. Everttts

Unless a child begins to feel that language is his, to record and shape his own experience, he will not only never come to write something vital and complex and mature enough to be literature; he will not live as he should. His education will have failed him.

—H. L. Elvin in **Talking and Writing,** p. ix (1)

We are all aware that ways of encouraging children to write are highly individualistic. No single method for teaching writing ensures that all boys and girls will become literate adults capable of writing clear, concise prose or poetry that possesses style and literary merit.

Recent emphasis upon the individual and his unique cognitive development and acquisition of language arts skills has stimulated some trends in elementary education; however, which differ sharply from the teaching techniques of the past. Whether these trends will shape educational practices or be merely passing fads is yet to be determined. But, to understand the current scene we need to know about the results of research, the materials produced by curriculum centers, and the opinions of respected authorities in English. This leaflet will examine these three areas of knowledge and then describe some of the newer practices in teaching they have stimulated.

STATUS OF RESEARCH

Research findings on methods of teaching composition have been inconclusive; even a U. S. Office of Educa-

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tion project which studied 500 research projects on composition offers little help and few definitive answers.

The Committee on the State of Knowledge About Composition of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in its 1963 report, *Research in Written Composition* (2), stated that research in composition is not highly developed and that method and elements of design employed do not permit definitive statements or make genuine contributions to knowledge in this area.

The *Review of Educational Research* for April 1967 (3) stated that although a great amount of research in language arts and fine arts had been done since 1964, research in composition lagged behind that in other areas.

In the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (4) published by the American Educational Research Association, Henry C. Meckel points out that development of language skills extends over a long period, making it difficult to observe growth or progress in writing at short intervals. He further states that recent educational controversies have created demands which require the formulation of new premises rather than the use of those inherited from the earlier part of this century.

CURRICULUM CENTERS

Attempts to utilize available research and to explore new approaches to composition have been undertaken by several curriculum development centers established under grants from the U. S. Office of Education. Each center has developed its own philosophy, view of composition, method of approach, and teaching techniques. Several of these are focusing their activities on children in elementary schools.

Northwestern—It is well known that the processes of composing and writing are complex. Developers of curricula for writing are certainly aware of them. Wallace Douglas, for example, states in his report of the Curriculum Study Center in English Composition at Northwestern University (5) that children should have activities which help them to find value in the act of writing and to gain some understanding of the composing process. Although the teaching materials produced at Northwestern University are mainly for grades 7 to 12, a unit was prepared for the fourth grade, *A Teacher's Experience with Composition* (6). This unit includes a close study of a few paragraphs from children's literature with suggestions focusing on the art of writing. For all levels the basic assumptions were alike:

1. Writing is a process, and lessons designed to "teach" writing must be developed from what is known or discoverable about that process.
2. Beginning writers need much experience in all the activities that go into the production of written pieces; the preparation of papers is only one of these activities.

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how teachers taught imagery of language and stimulated writing by extensive reading. The teaching materials produced at the University of Georgia for each grade level draw upon (a) the development of content for composition, (b) development of the structure of composition, (c) development of vocabulary, and (d) knowledge of the nature of language. One major stress in the work at this center has been evaluation.

The Wisconsin English Study, a statewide program of in-service education, has produced a final report, then *English Language Arts in Wisconsin*. One section relating to the expressive arts includes sugges-

tions for the development of listening and speaking skills and writing, with illustrations of teaching procedures. Robert C. Pooley, director of the University of Wisconsin Center, holds the strongest belief in integration of experience with one's native language and the resultant belief that all language skills are applicable to every English lesson as well as the study and appreciation of literature.

Nebraska—Another curriculum center developing materials on composition is the one at the University of Nebraska. Dissatisfied with the incompetence of college freshmen in written composition, the Department of English initiated a plan to study the state programs in high school English. After intensive study at several work conferences, the decision to approach composition and language through a study of literary models was reached. This emphasis on literature as part of the English program at all levels and on its contribution to writing and language use is found in all units developed at the Curriculum Center for grades 1 through 12 (9). Characteristic of the elementary grade units are selections from children's literature to be read to the class by the teacher with accompanying composition assignments.

OPINIONS OF AUTHORITIES

A move toward building more creative English programs was initiated at the Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching of English held at Dartmouth College in 1966. The two publications coming out of this conference, *Growth Through English* (10) by John Dixon and *The Uses of English* (11) by Herbert J. Muller, focus upon ways of actively involving the pupil in the learning process and of providing experiences for the inner development and growth of the child. These two scholars reported that the finished product is no measure of the achievement, learning, or growth experienced by the writer; but rather the prime value in this kind of writing rests in increased sensitivity and insight, the creation of a new sense of identity, and personal involvement with the process of writing.

Writing can help the author become more aware of his own thoughts and ideas, his own interpretation of life and events. His unique experiences with reality, his imaginative experience with literature, and his attitude toward the present situation or idea under study are synthesized during the process of writing. Thus, he has actually had a "new" experience. He discovers something about himself not previously realized. This realization can come through other art forms as well: creative play, pantomime, dance, improvisation, drama.

An exemplification of the approach suggested at Dartmouth can be found in *Teaching the "Unteachable"* by Herbert Kohl (12) and his more recent book *Thirty-Six Children* (13). Confronted by silent resistance and a lack of interest, Mr. Kohl abandoned conventional approaches and predetermined standards. He discovered that apathetic students could be fluent when writing about their inner feelings and beliefs or their personal encounters and experiences with the world of reality. These explorations helped each student to find his own identity.

Another new point of view relative to composition has been summarized by William A. Jenkins, former editor of *Elementary English*. In a Counciletter (14) describing the status of English teaching and the appearance of new views on composition, Dr. Jenkins wrote:

> Sequence in composition is receiving increasing attention, including work being done in the elementary school. But even more stress on process must be undertaken at all levels.... Teachers at all levels are beginning to accept the premise that composition is simply a way of shaping and communicating ideas through language. (p. 369)

Here the focus is upon composition as an ongoing process rather than confined to a single semester in the educational scene. Composition is a process which enables the writer to order his world of imagination and his world of experience. This means attention should be given to composition *throughout* our education programs.

NEW TEACHING PRACTICES

A description of classroom practices can indicate how these newer concepts of writing based on research, experience, and opinion are being implemented and what trends these innovations may indicate. One must be aware of certain precautions when observing new teaching techniques. For instance, practices vary greatly; what appear to teachers in some areas to be new practices have been well established in other areas. Many times established practices need only to be slightly altered and reorganized to give new perspective and focus. Furthermore, an innovative practice carries with it no certificate of endorsement; each practice should be evaluated for its contribution to effective learning and efficient teaching. Finally, a description of one type of writing does not in itself exclude a balance of other types—personal, creative, utilitarian—or the infinite demands for written communication in the classroom or in life situations.

With this as a basis for evaluation, let's examine some new practices for teaching composition.

Involvement, Not Motivation

To say one of the purposes of writing is to help pupils shape their experiences implies that pupils have had experiences which they can react to, describe, or explore—many experiences, both within and outside the classroom. It means they have time to react, to think, to

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observe, to discuss, and to question. Pupils cannot write until they know a great deal about a topic or become so emotionally involved that they are most eager to express themselves. Then, too, ideas, once gained, can be expressed through any one of the arts, writing being only one. It is up to the teacher to offer choices of media. In fact, no amount of motivation or stimulation can substitute for personal involvement of the pupil.

Many elementary teachers are therefore convinced that the older concept of motivation as a device for getting pupils into a mood for writing on a topic previously selected by the teacher is valueless if the pupils have had no experience or occasion for involvement. Motivation is designed to get children to respond, but ideas with which to respond *must* come first. Motivation alone is inadequate and implies pushing by the teacher.

An alternative practice is for the teacher to provide a rich environment with many opportunities for sensory participation and exploration and then to permit each pupil to write about that which he knows and about which he is sincerely interested in writing. Children themselves, then, want to write, not because of extrinsic motivation, but because they have something to say. After the child selects the form suitable for expressing his feelings at the moment – a poem, a sketch of personal moods, a fantasy, or a satirical story – honest, sincere writing begins.

Good writing needs a period of incubation for growth and maturity of ideas gained originally in a situation requiring active involvement on the part of the pupil.

The time allotment for this incubation may be the duration of a short trip around the school yard or several days of study, discussion, and reading of literature or reference books to supply a wealth of resource material. The length of time itself is insignificant, but the opportunity for involvement is crucial.

Sensitivity to Experience

The prewriting stage has been given more attention in newer practices. Sensitivity to detail during the period of active involvement can help pupils gain content for writing. An ordinary object in the environment may be selected and carefully observed: its color, shape, and texture and the surrounding odors or sounds. Pupils can select, for example, an anthill, the kitchen stove, or the school cafeteria and then write five sentences, each referring to one of the senses and describing what was observed.

This type of activity can be expanded to the making of observations influenced by a point of view. For example, in one classroom the author visited, the children were asked to observe a street after a cloudburst and describe a gutter filled with gushing water in terms of sensory impression. The teacher then asked the children to imagine a high school girl in gay, patent leather shoes and a pretty fluffy dress, going to pour at a school tea and coming upon this river of mud. How would she react to the water in the street? The children were then asked to imagine a first-grade boy going home from school wearing his new boots and bright yellow raincoat. How would he describe the water?

Since the child needs experience in order to have something to write about, many ways of providing for sensory involvement and observation are also part of the common pattern in many British schools. The most common are visiting a church, watching animals, or observing nature outside the classroom, but at times objects are brought into the classroom for careful study to serve as a springboard for writing. In *The Excitement of Writing* A. B. Clegg (15) gives many examples of writing by elementary and junior high school pupils with introductory statements on the practices or procedures used by the teachers to involve pupils in multisensory experiences.

Writing assignments based upon literature but still requiring the pupil to respond in terms of his own experience, feelings, sensitivity, and imagination are specifically explained by Geoffrey Summerfield in his book *Topics in English* (16). For example, such subjects as "predators," "fire and flame," "storms," "captivities," "pestilence and famine," and "fights" can be studied in many literary works and then become topics for writing. Projects might begin with the teacher reading orally a variety of literary selections on the topic and

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the students reading and studying many other selections. The study of literature could be accompanied by individual reports, film viewing, and other ancillary activities to supply the students with enough facts and raw material for the intensive writing which follows.

Improvement of Skills

We all realize that basic skills cannot be ignored. Some teachers wonder, however, how spelling, grammar, and punctuation can be improved if the focus of creative writing is mainly on content.

For too long, most American teachers have believed that they must correct all errors on written compositions and that if they do not, pupils will be unable to assimilate acceptable standards of English. Any change in this procedure is too often looked upon with alarm. Teachers actually feel guilty if they do not use a red pencil to correct errors on all written work. They should not.

Improvement in writing and an awareness of acceptable form can occur naturally, as in one first-grade class the author observed taught by Blodwen Herr at the Boston Elementary School in Peninsula, Ohio. Each month Mrs. Herr prepared and distributed a collection of news items written by her first-grade pupils. These were typed on a primary typewriter and mimeographed. Early in the year most selections were dictated to the teacher, but occasionally captions were written by the pupils to accompany pictures which they had drawn. By the time April had arrived, the news items were no longer dictated but written independently by the children. The following news items appeared in the spring issue:

> Hanna had poison ivy. She mist a few days of school. Some of her face is red. – Tracie
>
> We are makeing a paper macke rabbit. first we put balloons under the paper. Then we put paper on the balloons – Kevin
>
> Yesterday i got new mit. It is made in japan. I got it at spartan – Keith.

When the teacher gave copies to the pupils, they read the news items, then excitedly informed the teacher, "This is not what we meant to say! Some of the words don't look right. Next month we better have help before our stories are typed." An analysis of the entire collection showed clearly that news items appearing throughout the year were childlike and sincere. Growth in the ability to handle language could be observed month by month – all accomplished without the red-pencil process.

James Britton, of the Institute of Education, University of London, supported this way of working with children in one of his lectures at the NCTE Spring Institute on Explorations of Children's Writing. He stated that excellent material can be found in the writing of children who have had little formal grammar or study of English exercises. In fact, he reports, the teachers of these children have found that improvement in writing or use of words in one type of activity will be reflected in other types of writing. Thus, the careful preparation of reports in science or social studies is reflected in creative writing. Similar results have been reported by Dorothy O. Saunders in *Speaking About Teaching* (17). "The mechanics learned in practical writing begin to appear in personal writing while the freshness and vitality of the latter touch with individuality even quite prosaic material." (p. 195)

Margaret Langdon, also of England, helped her pupils who disliked writing, especially poetry, to recall emotional experiences and to express these briefly, simply, and with sincerity. She began by instructing her pupils to write quickly the first thing that came to mind about an imaginary spider on the wall. Another line was rapidly added to say something about its body. This was followed by a line containing three adjectives telling how the legs looked. Finally a concluding sentence was added after a line describing the web. The following selection illustrates the sincerity and directness of the writing.

> The Spider
>
> Spiders are horrible and ugly, the very thought of
> them sends shivers down my spine.
> This one has a bloated body, black and brown,
> Its legs are long and spindly and fine,
> The web is beautiful, dew-spangled, delicate,
> But it is a trap.
> The fly, though small, fights frantically, fiercely.
> Janet Stainer

Other assignments that followed are described by Mrs. Langdon in her book, *Let the Children Write* (18). However, it should be noted that writing alone did not ensure improvement in language skills. Interspersed with creative periods were periods devoted to skill development and to appreciation of the value of words, in order that pupils might learn how mechanical skills could be improved. This learning was done independently of the creative writing period.

Writing in First Grade

Research reports and accounts by many classroom teachers indicate that writing can be a strong feature of first-grade programs. Talking, writing, and reading offer reinforcement to each other, and the act of writing appears to help young pupils relate to the school experience of learning to read. In addition, writing provides a means for active involvement of the pupil as he becomes acquainted with his new environment.

Children using i.t.a. write words as they sound them and are not confined to conventional spelling patterns.

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Freed from this restriction, they usually create sentence structures resembling the patterns of oral speech. These children write whatever words they need and thus think more about the story they are telling. Likewise, early writing in first grade accompanies the language arts approach to reading instruction. Research on this approach indicates that children can write much earlier than was previously thought and that this writing aids in learning to read as well as contributing to the process of writing.

Enlarging the Young Author's Audience

It has recently been recognized that the audience has a definite role in oral and written composition. In both the programs mentioned above, for example, the teacher, who regards writing as an important portion of the program, and classmates serve as a sympathetic and understanding audience. Whether it is composed of teacher, friends, family, or school community member, the audience helps the individual to explore and use language in its many forms. Opportunities to engage in creative uses of oral language become important, for they become the basis of written communication. Both oral and written communication need rightful nutriment; both imply an audience. A statement from the English Language Framework for California Public Schools (19) suggests the importance of the audience: "Since language is our chief means of ordering experience and relating ourselves to the world, composition is an act of self-definition and expression in response to an audience" (p. 63). This audience may be a public audience or the writer himself.

Since the writer usually has some audience in mind when he writes or talks, he should obtain some feedback from that audience if at all possible. This response or acceptance can take many forms. Sometimes it may only be a quiet smile from the teacher or the opportunity to read aloud what has been written. It might involve oral reports or stories. At other times the teacher might offer assistance in revising and editing a selection for submission to a school publication and a wider audience. Many recognized authors have indicated they gained their first personal satisfaction in composing and their first awareness that writing was an activity in which they could engage when they saw their efforts printed in a school publication.

Poetry festivals and writers' conferences have been found to be successful ways of extending interest in composing stories or poems for more gifted students of writing. Esther Mayfield, of Palm Beach, directs an annual poetry festival to which two hundred students are invited each year to attend an all-day session at the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum. At the festival they hear practicing poets discuss their own poetry and the composing process. Later, in small groups, the "young poets" discuss the poetry they have submitted.

Near Oakland University in Michigan each elementary class is invited to send the "author" of its choice – a boy or girl in the class who writes well – to an all-day conference at the university. The pupils listen to an author of children's books and then read and discuss their own writing after having lunch together. Later in the afternoon they are invited to write their impressions of the day. Harry Hahn, director of this project, reports that the enthusiasm for this activity indicates even the youngest pupils can and want to write.

Pupil Writing and Adult Standards

At all grade levels we need to remember that what is desired is sincere pupil writing accepted by the teacher, not writing evaluated in terms of adult standards or adult literary writings. Evaluation techniques and formal scales for measurement of selected linguistic features in children's writing may be extremely valuable as research instruments. But it does not necessarily follow that such instruments should be used as guides for planning a sequential program in composition or for instructional purposes. Such instruments examine only a small segment of the total effort and achievement in composition and so ignore other values. Composition is a complex process involving the acquisition of content, the use of written communication skills, the selection of linguistic and literary structures, the relationship of writer to audience, and the personal involvement of the writer with his experiences that takes shape at the moment pen and paper come into contact. Measuring only one segment can be disastrous to the entire process of writing as experienced by the younger writer.

SUMMARY

Reflection upon recent research, the activities of curriculum centers, and the opinions of respected authorities in writing and composition have indicated these new directions in teaching practices:

- A greater use of oral language in storytelling, creative dramatics, improvising, choral speaking, etc., is being introduced at all levels.
- Writing as a language act is beginning in the primary grades.
- There is a greater acceptance by teachers of the writing of children.
- More freedom from spelling restrictions and other formalities is being given during the initial stages of writing.
- There is increased encouragement of writing, especially in the primary grades.

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- A greater variety of experiences for observation and sensitivity are being included in the school curriculum.
- The use of writing is seen as a way of structuring one's world.
- Children's writings are shared in a variety of ways.
- Teachers are beginning to recognize that pupils write for an audience.
- There is a greater acceptance of the idea that the values gained by the individual in the process of writing are not measured by the end product.
- Teachers are realizing that the older concepts of motivation and stimulation are inadequate today.
- Literature is being used to acquaint the pupil with style and expressive vocabulary.
- Teachers are turning to individual guidance in grammar to supplement group instruction.
- There is an awareness of different writing demands in creative and utilitarian situations.
- There is general agreement that improvement in one type of writing is usually reflected in other types.

Only time will reveal which of these new directions in composition will become continuing elements in the elementary curriculum. For the present, none can be ignored.

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